

Jake Shaddox, Humptulips, talks about his experiences in Alabama and Mississippi

Helping people in need during the aftermath of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita was a life-changing experience for Jake Shaddox.

Born in Eugene, Ore., raised in Aberdeen and now living in Humptulips, his work as a Washington Conservation Corps (WCC) crew member in the Gulf Coast taught him how precious life can be.

“I joined WCC because I love being out in the woods,” Jake said. “I love seeing wildlife and doing hard, physical work. When my fiancé told me about WCC, I thought it would be a great way to be outdoors, work hard and feel great about what I was doing.”

Little did Jake realize just how much his WCC experience would deepen his appreciation for hard work. Last Oct. 22, Jake and his crew were sent to the Gulf Coast for 30 days to help with hurricane recovery.

“Even after several months,” he said, “you could still see that something major had happened. People were still really affected by the hurricane.”

Jake lived in Mobile, Ala., on one of the Carnival cruise ships sent to the Gulf to act as temporary shelter. He worked in the “special needs” room, where residents filled out requests for desperately needed supplies.

Mornings started early when he and his supervisor met to plan the day and organize and prioritize the requests. He then got to work on the phone, calling local churches and distribution centers to round up the supplies requested by the residents.

“They had nothing,” he said. “They needed everything – pants, shoes, toothpaste, all necessities, diapers, school supplies, blankets, everything. I tried to help just find the basics.

“But the food was pretty good,” he continued. “Everything was buffet style. Everyone got a time slot for when they could eat. We were all well-fed. I took the stairs a lot to work off the food. And on a ten-story ship, that’s a lot of stairs.”

There were some surreal moments in his search for supplies for the residents. He recalled one man who needed size 62 pants. Jake was having a hard time finding them, and when he reported this to the resident, the man replied, “That’s OK. I think I’ll just go up to the buffet.”

Pass Christian, Miss., – where Katrina came ashore – was utterly destroyed by the storm’s fury.

“Walking through Pass Christian was one of the most stunning moments of my life,” Jake said. “There was no noise. There were cars out in the sea. No buildings. X’s marking the numbers of survivors, dead and missing. It made it real.”

Jake had high praise for his WCC supervisor, Darrel Borden. “He is a great person, a wonderful man,” said Jake. “He challenged me to go to the next step, and helped me realize my potential.”

Part of that potential included finding the strength to reach out to people in need. “So many people appreciated our efforts. The ‘thank you’s’ really made me feel good.”

His experiences in the Gulf Coast taught Jake some important lessons. “There is a lot more to volunteer work than what you think. It really gave me a boost inside to help people. Be thankful for everything you have, every day. Look on the bright side.”